

Purpose

In February of 2006, a survey was sent to local governments to obtain feedback on trails from the perspective of users, managers and planners. A similar survey was sent to planning district commissions with questions for regional planners. The goal was to determine the most significant problems faced by trail planners, users, and managers and to learn what assistance local governments and regional planners expected from the state.

Methodology

A one-page questionnaire was sent to the parks and recreation director at each local government asking them to rank the top three responses to a series of questions. Sixty-nine Virginia counties have full-time parks and recreation departments, as do 21 incorporated towns and 38 cities. Responses were received from 14 cities, 38 counties, 2 towns, and 2 trail management entities — a response rate of about 44 percent. Local government responses were evaluated based on whether a locality reported itself as urban, rural, or mixed (transitioning from rural to urban).

A similar questionnaire was sent to each planning district commission (PDC). Responses were received from all.

Responses

Regional planners reported that trails most benefit the region by promoting active living with healthier options for everyday

routes. Trail users who get to places on their own power not only reduce their risk for chronic disease, they have less impact on air and water quality, use less fuel reserves, and make lighter demand on congested traffic routes than automobile users. Regional planners also valued trails because they provide recreation alternatives for all ages, incomes and abilities. Other important benefits included attracting businesses; separating hiker, joggers, and bicyclists from roadway traffic and road shoulders; enhancing quality-of-life indicators that serve to attract and keep families/young people in the area; and creating outdoor environmental educational opportunities (see Table A-8).

Trail services to regional and local governments

Survey respondents were also asked to rank the most important way the state can assist with trail-related efforts (outside of funding) through the Trails and Greenways Program. Regional planners ranked providing a clearinghouse for technical documents and other trails-related information at the top, along with maintaining an up-to-date statewide trail inventory and Web site for trail promotion. Respondents also valued on-site trail evaluation and assessment and educational workshops and conferences. Areas of assistance requested in the “other” category include sharing equipment, providing grant writing and environmental compliance workshops, sharing stories and technical assistance at local trail meetings promoting trails to businesses and citizens, and assisting local planners with public relation/educational campaigns and materials on the benefits of trails, greenways, bikeways, etc.

Table A-8. Top Three Ways Trails Benefit the Region

Ranking	Benefit
1	Provide recreation alternatives for all ages, incomes and abilities
2	Promote active living with healthier options for everyday routines
3	Attract businesses and ecotourists

Table A-9. Top Four Ways DCR Can Assist with Trail-related Efforts

PDC Ranking	Local Government Ranking	DCR Assistance
1	1	Provide a clearinghouse for technical documents and other trails-related information and contact data for trail professionals and volunteer groups
2	4	Maintain an up-to-date statewide trail inventory and Web site for trail promotion
3	2	Provide on-site trail evaluation and assessment
4	3	Provide educational workshops and conferences

Table A-10. Top Four Needs for Trails

PDC Ranking	Local Government Ranking	Trail Needs
1	1	Connected regional trail systems (trunkline)
2	4	Trails in residential neighborhoods (spur)
3	2	Upgrade and maintenance of existing trails
4	3	Trails in parks

Table A-11. Top Three Challenges for Trail Planners

PDC Ranking	Local Government Ranking	Challenges
1	1	Lack of funding for trail planning
2	2	Acquiring trail corridors
3	3	Lack of political support

Table A-12. Top Four Challenges for Trail Users

PDC Ranking	Local Government Ranking	Challenges
1	2	No trails close to home or work
2	1	Lack of information on existing trails
3	4	Concerns about their safety on the trail
4	3	Poorly maintained trails

For local governments, providing a clearinghouse was again ranked the top way the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) could help, but on-site evaluation and assessment ranked second, followed by educational workshops and conferences. An up-to-date inventory is probably less important to local governments because they are not as involved with trail linkages across jurisdictional lines. Local governments would also like DCR to host public meetings about trail benefits and liabilities and provide developers with economic justification for making private trails accessible to the public (see Table A-9).

Connecting through regional trail systems

Asked to rank their organization's top need for trails, both regional planners and local governments responded that connected regional trail systems (trunkline trails) were most important (see Table A-10).

Challenges for trail planners

Regional planners and local governments agree that a lack of funding and difficulty in acquiring a trail corridor are the two major problems for trail planners. Rural and transitioning localities were more likely to report that regulatory hurdles were a problem, which may reflect a lack of experience dealing with regulatory agencies on trail projects. Urban localities were more likely to rank lack of information as a problem. All local governments responding reported a lack of political support for trails (see Table A-11).

Challenges for trail users

Regional planners identified the need for more trails close to home as foremost in response to the survey (see Table A-12). Communities built after the advent of the automobile often lack bike/pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks or roads with speeds conducive to bicycling. Trails and greenways on public lands may not be easily accessible to local communities. Easy access to trails depends both on proximity and awareness of the trail. Many communities do not have the funds to properly sign and promote existing trails. In fact, lack of information about trails was ranked the number one problem for trail users by local governments. In rural areas with smaller tax bases, the need for marketing is more acute. Respondents to a 2006 survey by BikeWalk Virginia also reported that there was inadequate sharing of trail-related information, and the most sought-after user information was trail maps.

Due to the sale of farm and timberlands and other development pressures, existing trails on private lands are disappearing. This was ranked the number one problem for trail users in Hanover, Lancaster, Rappahannock and Buchanan counties. Five out of six respondents in rural southwestern Virginia were also concerned about this issue. In rural areas, the public relies on the use of large farms or timberlands to walk, bicycle, hunt or ride horses. Unless the state or federal government has significant land holdings, there is often little public land available.

Table A-13. Top Four Challenges for Trail Managers

Local Government Ranking	Challenges
1	Lack of funding for trail maintenance
2	Conflicts between different kinds of users
3	Lack of user etiquette/environmental ethics
4	Decreasing volunteer support

Local governments ranked safety as less of a problem for users than the maintenance of trails. Localities that were transitioning from rural to urban communities were more likely to express concerns about safety. This may reflect a problem with perception as these areas make this transition or reflect that trails in urban areas seem safer because they get more use. In urban areas, trail maintenance becomes more of an issue, presumably because activity on the trail increases the wear-and-tear. This may also be a reflection of a larger pool of users reporting maintenance problems.

Conflicts between user groups was ranked a significant problem for trail managers in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, where there is more demand on existing trails. User conflict was also an issue in rural areas like the Shenandoah Valley and Southwest Virginia, where trails in National Forests serve hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians.

Maintenance of trails was ranked a problem in five out of seven responses from the Shenandoah Valley region, and in two-thirds of the responses from Northern Virginia. At least

half of the responses from Central Virginia, the Roanoke Valley and Southwest Virginia ranked maintenance as a problem for users and managers.

Challenges for trail managers

In urban areas where trails get the most use, localities report that maintenance of existing trails is more important than new trail construction. Half of these urban respondents felt that upgrading and maintenance of existing trails outranked the need for new trails. Lack of funding for trail maintenance was clearly the number one problem for trail managers across the state (see Table A-13).

Rural localities report that decreasing volunteer support is a problem for trail managers. Many trail user groups report a lack of younger, newer members. This could be the result of an aging population and also indicative of a less active younger generation. As these new members replace retiring ranks of volunteers, there is a growing concern that their numbers may be lower in future years.